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Bay Area workers get break on driving

Area employers rank favorably in the nation for providing employees with incentives to use public transportation

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MEDIANEWS

The Bay Area is the place to work when it comes to benefits for public transit commuters, according to a list of commuter-friendly employers released last week by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Seven of the top 11 Fortune 500 companies ranked by the agency are based in the Bay Area, three in Santa Clara, topped by No. 1 Intel, with 94 percent of its workforce eligible for a generous package of benefits aimed at getting commuters onto buses, trains and ferries and out of their cars.

Locally, the Bay Area's Best Workplaces for Commuters released a list of 179 employers that provide a range of benefits for employees who commute via transit.

"We're very proud of it. We try to offer our employees just about any options they can think of," said Bob Wynne, a spokesman for Oracle, which has about 7,000 Bay Area employees working in its headquarters in Redwood Shores and its facility in Pleasanton.

Tied for third place with Mountain View-based Google, Oracle provides a menu of benefits that includes one-third subsidized transit vouchers under the Commuter Check program, van pools that range as far as Vallejo and a shuttle from BART and Caltrain stations.

The local list, which is not ranked, is laden with local offices of major corporations and government agencies.

But it also includes smaller firms such as Engage PR in Alameda, which offers stipends for employees who travel farther than the average 45-mile round trip, as well as a 50 percent subsidy of public transit costs and even a yet-untapped \$100 or \$200 bonus for employees who purchase a new vehicle that increases their fuel economy by 25 percent or 50 percent, respectively, Engage Vice President Jeannette Bitz said.

When the agency was formed in 2002, "we decided we need to be sensitive about the environment and the community around us," Bitz said, to say nothing of the need for its young talent to get a hand commuting from places such as Silicon Valley to Alameda.

Another firm on the list, Oakland-based Trust Administrators Inc., is also in the business of coordinating benefits for its employer clients, company President Royce Charney said.

The company has urged employers to move beyond vouchers for commuters to debit cards and even cash reimbursements for employees who turn in transit receipts and used fare cards, Charney said.

Providing such benefits -- helped by government tax breaks and other subsidies -- is becoming an economic imperative as well as an aid in limiting traffic congestion and air pollution, said Alan Pisarski, one of the nation's top commuting experts.

As baby boomers retire, employers will struggle to find and retain skilled employees, said Pisarski, author of the definitive statistical reference released Monday, "Commuting in America III."

"Commuters will be more able to work where they want and live where they want," Pisarski said. "It won't be: 'You have to be here at 8 o'clock in the morning, leave at 5, and if you can't deal with that, to hell with you.'"

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